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SECRET.

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W.M. (89).

15th Conclusions.

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WAR CABINET 18 (89).

CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held on Tuesday, September 12, 1939, at 11.30 A.M.

Present :

The Right Hon. Sir JOHN SIMON, K.C., M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer
(in the Chair).

The Right Hon. VISCOUNT HALIFAX,
Secretary of State for Foreign
Affairs.

The Right Hon. WINSTON S.
CHURCHILL, M.P., First Lord of the
Admiralty.

The Right Hon. L. HORE-BELISHA,
M.P., Secretary of State for War.

The Right Hon. Sir KINGSLEY WOOD,
M.P., Secretary of State for Air.

The Right Hon. Sir SAMUEL HOARE,
Bt., M.P., Lord Privy Seal.

The Right Hon. LORD HANKEY,
Minister without Portfolio.

The following were also present :

The Right Hon. Sir JOHN ANDERSON,
M.P., Secretary of State for the
Home Department and Minister for
Home Security.

The Right Hon. ANTHONY EDEN, M.P.,
Secretary of State for Dominion
Affairs.

The Right Hon. W. S. MORRISON, K.C.,
M.P., Chancellor of the Duchy of
Lancaster and Minister for Food
(Item 10).

Mr. R. H. CROSS, M.P., Minister of
Economic Warfare (Item 10).

Sir HORACE J. WILSON, Permanent
Secretary to the Treasury.

Air Chief Marshal Sir CYRIL L. N.
NEWALL, Chief of the Air Staff.

Admiral of the Fleet Sir DUDLEY
POUND, First Sea Lord and Chief of
Naval Staff.

General Sir W. EDMUND IRONSIDE,
Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

Secretariat.

Sir EDWARD BRIDGES.

Captain A. D. NICHOLL, R.N.

Mr. F. HEMMING.

Mr. W. D. WILKINSON.

Lieutenant-Colonel E. I. C. JAGOR, R.E.

WAR CABINET 13 (39).

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Air Operations.
(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (39), 11th
Conclusions,
Minute 2.)

1. *The Secretary of State for Air* said that there had been little air activity during the preceding 24 hours. The movement of air units to France was progressing normally.

The War Cabinet took note of this statement.

Naval
Situation.
(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (39), 11th
Conclusions,
Minute 3.)

2. *The First Lord of the Admiralty* reported that the destroyers *Vanquisher* and *Walker*, escorting an outward-bound convoy, had been in collision. The *Vanquisher* had been reported to be in a sinking condition and the *Walker* seriously damaged.

The destroyer *Wrestler* had also sustained damage as a result of collision with a Merchant Vessel.

Two Merchant Ships had been sunk by a German submarine in the previous 24 hours. The Officer Commanding the submarine responsible for one sinking had sent a wireless message addressed to the First Lord, giving the position of the boats carrying the survivors.

A statement was being prepared by the Admiralty comparing the numbers and tonnage of ships sunk with the clearances and arrivals and also with the peak period sinkings in the last war.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

Military
Situation.
(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (39), 11th
Conclusions,
Minute 4.)
Poland.

3. *The Chief of the Imperial General Staff* said that there was little fresh news from Poland. The line north of Warsaw appeared to be holding, and there was a chance that some at any rate of the eight Polish Divisions would escape from the pocket west of Warsaw. On the south-western front the Germans were making demands on Hungary to be allowed to pass through Ruthenia with a view to extending their turning movement round the left of the Polish line. The Hungarians were believed to be resisting these demands.

News had been received that rain had begun in Poland. This would not only slow up the German operations, but, if it continued, would make it very difficult for them to withdraw any of their formations. A good fall of rain, therefore, would effectively prevent an attack by Germany in force on the Western Front before the winter.

On the Western Front the French concentration must now be almost complete. Particulars were given of the move of the British Expeditionary Force. An unsatisfactory feature of the position was the lack of contact between the French and the British on the one hand and the Belgians on the other. In the event of a German invasion through Belgium, British and French forces would require to move up rapidly in support of the Belgian Army. For this purpose conversations with the Belgians, and reconnaissance by French and British Officers, were most desirable. The Belgian attitude, however, prevented this.

The First Lord of the Admiralty considered the attitude of the Belgian Government indefensible, and hoped that they would be left in no doubt as to the effect it would produce on the minds of the British. The Belgians owed everything to us, and their retention of their Colonial Empire would entirely depend on our victory. It was essential that, whatever outward attitude they might adopt, they should consent to close relations between the forces of the three countries.

The War Cabinet agreed:—

To invite the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to examine the possibility of pressing the Belgian Government to consent to Military Conversations between the Belgian and British Staffs to meet the contingency of a possible German invasion of Belgium.

Appearance in the Press of Information relating to the Expeditionary Force.

4. *The Lord Privy Seal* informed the War Cabinet of the sequence of events leading up to the appearance, in the morning papers of that day, of statements that the Expeditionary Force was fighting alongside the French. Notwithstanding that an Officer of the Ministry of Information had been sent to Paris to watch over the release of news affecting British interests, and that the French had been warned particularly of the danger of revealing anything connected with the move of the Expeditionary Force, an official announcement had been made on the French wireless at mid-day on Monday, and various statements had appeared in the French newspapers. The British Press had then asked whether they were to be released from the ban on news about the Expeditionary Force, and, at 7 P.M. on Monday, an Officer of the War Office had replied to an enquiry from the Ministry of Information that the papers might publish a statement limited to quite general terms. The various papers had thereupon gone to press with full stories on the lines of the information which had appeared in France.

Later in the evening the War Office had changed their minds, and had said that the publication of this news must be stopped. Action had been taken accordingly, but by that time many of the newspapers were on their way to distribution, and to stop them would have meant depriving the public of their morning newspapers that day. A number had been stopped, and there would no doubt be claims for compensation. Others had come out that morning with statements in general terms, but giving no details. A Conference had been arranged that morning at which Lord Macmillan, Sir Findlater Stewart and the Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff would meet the big editors, to decide what should now be done to allay the general excitement in the Press over the events of the previous night.

The Secretary of State for War said that at 11.15 P.M. the previous night he had been rung up by Mr. Waterfield, who had said that the newspapers were carrying stories about the Expeditionary Force, and that he understood that the War Office had authorised the lifting of the ban. Enquiry showed that at 7 P.M. an Officer at the War Office had been rung up by the Ministry of Information, who said that the French were making references in their wireless and newspapers to the presence of the Expeditionary Force and suggesting that the whole story was out. On the assumption that secrecy could no longer be maintained, the Officer concerned had told the Ministry of Information that they should confine themselves to stating that the British troops were establishing good relations with the French. Instead of this, however, the newspapers had produced statements to the effect that the British Field Force was engaged with the enemy alongside the French, and that the information had been officially obtained from the Ministry of Information.

From a report of the matter which he had subsequently received, it appeared that an official of the Ministry of Information had taken the view that it was necessary to strike a balance between the need for secrecy and the natural desire of the French to hearten their people, and that provided the statements made were confined to time and place, no harm would ensue.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that the publication of this information was from the military point of view most unfortunate. Officers in the War Office were frequently rung up on the telephone by officers of the Ministry of Information and were pressed to release news. He himself had been rung up at 3 A.M. and again at 4 A.M. that morning. From the point of view of the War Office there were two things which should now be secured: first, that the Ministry of Information should obtain statements on important matters from the War Office in writing; secondly, that with regard to the Expeditionary Force there should be silence from now on, until its concentration was complete. From a military point of view this was vital.

Discussion ensued as to how the situation which had arisen should be dealt with. It was generally agreed that nothing should be done to contradict what had already been published. The Germans would know that we were planning to send an Expeditionary Force to France, and what had appeared in the Press might lead them to think that its concentration had taken place earlier than they might have expected. The important point, therefore, was to prevent any ventilation in the Press of dates and strengths, and of ports of embarkation and disembarkation. In this connection the most probable source of leakage was thought to be the French Provincial Press, and steps should be taken to prevent publication of details in local papers.

The future relations between the Ministry of Information and the Service Departments were then discussed and it was agreed that the system whereby the Ministry of Information was responsible for the issuing of news to the Press should continue, but that on all important matters the concurrence of the Service Ministry concerned should be obtained in writing, and not over the telephone.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer undertook to see Lord Macmillan and to inform him of the discussion which had taken place and of the views of the War Cabinet.

The War Cabinet agreed:—

- (a) that no steps should be taken to contradict or modify in any way the statements which had already appeared in the Press regarding the arrival of the British Expeditionary Force in France, but that the most stringent precautions should be taken to avoid the publication of any details as to dates, units or places:
- (b) to invite the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to make representations in Paris with a view to preventing the appearance in the Press, and particularly in local newspapers, of any details, as in (a) above, relating to the arrival and concentration of the British Expeditionary Force:
- (c) to confirm the Conclusions reached by the War Cabinet at their 5th Meeting in regard to responsibility for the issue of communiqués, subject to the addition that the Ministry of Information should obtain the concurrence in writing of any of the Service Departments concerned before releasing to the Press military information of importance:
- (d) to take note that the Chancellor of the Exchequer would inform the Minister for Information of the discussion which had taken place and of the conclusions of the War Cabinet.

(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (89), 5th
Conclusions,
Minute 11.)

Public Opinion
in Sweden.
Information.

5. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* informed the War Cabinet that he had received a telegram from His Majesty's Minister, Stockholm (No. 61) stating that there had been a great decline in the prestige of His Majesty's Government since the outbreak of war, due in a large part to the difficulties experienced by the Swedish Press in obtaining news from England. Press cables from London to Sweden were always delayed, as contrasted with cables from Paris which were delivered promptly, and telegraphic communication from Berlin which was apparently freely permitted, with the result that the greater part of the news in Sweden came from German sources. In the same report, the British Minister stated that the Swedish view was that the dropping of leaflets over Germany was misconceived and was not succeeding in undermining German morale.

Dropping of
Leaflets.
(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (39), 11th
Conclusions,
Minute 2.)

The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs stated that, as regards the leaflets, the same view had been expressed to him the previous day by the Dominion High Commissioners.

The War Cabinet agreed :—

To defer further consideration of the benefit secured by the dropping of leaflets over Germany until receipt of the Report asked for from the Minister of Information at the meeting of the War Cabinet noted in the margin.

Egypt.
(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (39), 9th
Conclusions,
Minute 11.)

6. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* referred to telegram No. 575, dated 11th September, 1939, from His Majesty's Ambassador, Cairo, from which it appeared that the Egyptian Prime Minister was adopting an unhelpful attitude with regard to the declaration of war by Egypt against Germany, on the ground that the Egyptian Constitution provided that an aggressive war could not be declared without the approval of Parliament, and that in the present circumstances a war declared by Egypt might be held to fall under this heading. The question for consideration by the War Cabinet was whether pressure should be exerted on the Prime Minister to summon Parliament for the purpose of approving a declaration of war, or whether it would be better for the present to leave matters as they stood. Subject to the military point of view, the Foreign Office favoured the latter policy, since it was not possible to predict how large a majority could be obtained in the Egyptian Parliament. He understood that the Egyptian Government had taken the practical steps to which the military authorities attached importance.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that from the military point of view he was quite satisfied with the present situation.

The War Cabinet agreed :—

that in the circumstances no further action should be taken at the moment to press the Egyptian Government to declare war against Germany.

U.S.S.R.

7. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* said that reports received from His Majesty's Ambassador, Moscow, indicated that the Soviet mobilisation was of a precautionary nature at the present time, but that there was a possibility that later the Soviet might desire to secure a portion of Polish territory. From the economic point of view the intentions of the Soviet Government appeared obscure. They were in a position, if they so desired, to render help to Poland, but they were raising great difficulties in this regard, and the prospects of their being willing to afford help were unpromising.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

12.5.39
(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (89), 11th
Conclusions,
Minute 7.)

8. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* said that the reports from His Majesty's Ambassador, Rome, showed that Count Ciano was now quite willing to discuss economic problems. The Foreign Office were at the moment engaged in drafting, in consultation with the Ministry of Economic Warfare, the telegram on this subject, the dispatch of which had been approved by the War Cabinet at the meeting noted in the margin.

A recent telegram had reported the dispatch by Italy of six aircraft to Poland.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

Turkey.
(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (89), 12th
Conclusions,
Minute 4.)

9. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* informed the War Cabinet that a telegram just received from His Majesty's Ambassador, Ankara, indicated that the Turkish Government were raising further difficulties in regard to the proposed treaty. He had not yet had an opportunity of studying the telegram, and he would accordingly defer raising this question until a later meeting of the War Cabinet.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

Roumanian Oil.

10. The War Cabinet had before them a note by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on the subject of Roumanian Oil. (Paper No. W.P. (39) 22.)

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said that he had convened a Conference to consider certain proposals put forward by the War Office for preventing Roumania's oil stocks and future production from reaching Germany. Roumania's total output was about 6½ million tons, of which 4 million tons were exported, Germany taking one million tons. The Conference had recommended the purchase of all surplus stocks and the placing of contracts for all surplus output for the next six months. There was every reason to suppose that suitable arrangements could be made for its disposal. As an immediate step, the Conference recommended the charter of all available barges and rail tank cars in Roumania. The Conference had not attempted to express a view on the effect which the proposed action might have on Germany or on the Roumanian Government.

These proposals were strongly supported by the Service Ministers. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* did not anticipate any unfavourable re-action from the Roumanian Government. So far as Germany was concerned, he expressed the view that we should accept such risk as might be involved that our action might lead Germany to invade Roumania. In his view, the German attitude towards Roumania would probably be governed by wider issues.

This view met with approval. In further discussion it was agreed that an option should, if possible, be obtained on future Roumanian supplies after the expiry of the six months' contracts. Emphasis was laid on the importance of ensuring that we did not pay excessive prices for the oil.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer said that he proposed to settle certain financial points direct with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

The War Cabinet agreed:—

- (i) that the Foreign Secretary should instruct the British Minister at Bucharest to arrange for the immediate purchase of all surplus oil stocks in Roumania, and for placing contracts for all surplus output for the next six months which might otherwise go to Germany, and to obtain an option on supplies after the expiry of the six months' contracts.

- (ii) that the disposal of the oil purchased in accordance with (i) above, should be arranged so as to disturb our existing oil contracts as little as possible:
- (iii) that all payments should be made in blocked sterling:
- (iv) that every endeavour should be made to persuade the French to take an equal share in the transactions:
- (v) that the British Minister at Bucharest should likewise be authorised forthwith to charter all available oil barges and rail tank cars in Roumania:
- (vi) that the Treasury, in consultation with the Mines Department, should arrange for the British Minister at Bucharest to be given the best possible technical assistance in carrying out the instructions referred to in (i) and (v) above.

Loans from the United States. Suggestion by the High Commissioners for Canada and for the Commonwealth of Australia.

11. *The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs* informed the War Cabinet of a suggestion made by the Canadian and Australian High Commissioners, to the effect that this country might be able to raise loans in the United States indirectly, through the intermediary of the Canadian and Australian Governments, since the ban imposed by the Johnson Act would not be applicable to those Governments.

The two Dominion Governments were, of course, aware that as belligerents they came within the scope of the Neutrality Act. Presumably, however, they regarded that Act as a measure which might soon be repealed, whereas there was no prospect of the repeal of the Johnson Act.

The general view of the War Cabinet was that, while this suggestion should be suitably acknowledged, it was unlikely that we should be able to adopt it. In any case it would be bad psychology for us to attempt by a subterfuge to circumvent the Johnson Act. The only method likely to have a successful issue would be for us to put our cards on the table and to ask the United States Government whether they would be willing that we should deal with this matter on the lines of the present suggestion. It might be desirable that the Mission now about to proceed to the United States, which included a financial expert, should be authorised to mention this suggestion to the United States authorities.

The War Cabinet took note of the statement made by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, and approved generally the line of action summarised above.

*Richmond Terrace, S.W. 1,
September 12, 1939.*